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Agca says Soviets ordered attempt on pontiff's life

By John Phillips
United Press International

ROME — Turkish terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca, who shot Pope John Paul II in 1981, told a Rome court yesterday that the Soviet Union had ordered and financed the assassination attempt.

"The order to kill the Pope started from the Soviet Embassy in Sofia," the capital of Bulgaria, said Agca, 27. Agca, four other Turks and three Bulgarians are on trial for plotting the attack.

Agca said a Soviet diplomat helped him plan the May 13, 1981, attack in St. Peter's Square. It was the first time during the trial that Agca — who is already serving a life sentence for shooting and seriously wounding the Pope — has accused the Soviets of directing and financing the shooting.

In 1982, Agca said publicly that he had been hired by Bulgarian agents to shoot the Pope and that the KGB, the Soviet secret service, knew of the plan.

There was no immediate reaction from the Soviet Union. The Soviets have accused the CIA of fabricating the notion of a "Bulgarian connection" to the papal shooting. Bulgaria has denied playing any role.

Agca told the court that an official at the Soviet Embassy in Sofia had paid for the attack by giving money to the leader of the Gray Wolves, a right-wing Turkish terrorist group, through defendant Bekir Celenk, who is being tried in absentia. Agca was a member of the Gray Wolves.

"The first secretary of the Soviet Embassy paid three million West German marks [then worth \$1.2 million] through Celenk to the head of the Gray Wolves, Celebi," Agca said. Musa Serdar Celebi is another Turkish defendant. He is accused of acting as a link between Agca and Celenk.

Agca said the Gray Wolves had acted with the knowledge of the three Bulgarians on trial: Sergei Ivanov Antonov, 37, the former Rome station chief of the Bulgarian state airline; Todor S. Aivazov, 40, a former cashier at the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, and Zhelyo Vasilev, 42, a former assistant to the Bulgarian Embassy's military attache in Rome.

"We Gray Wolves acted with the determining complicity of Antonov, Aivazov and Vasilev," said Agca.

Under questioning from Judge Severino Santiapichi, Agca identified the Soviet diplomat as "Milenkov" or

"Malenkov" and gave a detailed physical description.

Agca testified that in July 1980, he met with the diplomat, Celenk, Aivazov and his boyhood friend and co-defendant, Oral Celik, in Room 911 of Vitosha Hotel in Sofia to plan the attempt on the Polish pontiff's life.

Asked why the Soviet diplomat was at the meeting, Agca said, "We also talked about attacks on NATO."

"We decided to eliminate the Pope in the spring of 1981," Agca said of the hotel meeting. "First we had to spend some time in Europe. Celik and I had to carry it out. The Soviet Embassy in Bulgaria had to help us."

Celenk identified the Soviet diplomat as the first secretary of the embassy, and the plans were discussed in Bulgarian and English, Agca said.

Agca described the Soviet official he met as 5 feet 10 inches tall, "close to blonde" and heavily built. He wore spectacles and was aged 40 to 45 years old, Agca said. "I could pick him out from 100 common criminals," he said.

The other Turkish defendant is Omar Bagci, alleged to be a member of the Gray Wolves.

The trial resumes today.